IUCC’s Spooky Sunday and “Trunk or Treat” on October 31 was tons of fun!

Photos courtesy of Tricia Aynes & Cindy O’Dell
IUCC Celebrated its 30th Anniversary of being an Open and Affirming Congregation on Sunday, October 17th!
More Photos of the 30th Anniversary Celebration of ONA!

ONA photos courtesy of Pastor Sarah, Tricia Aynes, & Duane Vajgrt

Speakers included Irvine Mayor Farrah Khan (L) and Radiant Health Care Executive Director Phil Yaeger (R), flanking Pastor Sarah
Wow! What an October! With five full Sundays, we celebrated the Spirit among us! It began with World Communion Sunday and a spread of bread reminding us that we are connected around the world and we have an obligation to share not just the good news, but also our bread so we can ensure that no one goes hungry.

Then we kicked off our Stewardship Season as we “Refresh, Reboot and Renew,” returning from the thick of the pandemic and preparing to embrace the new year. We celebrated our 30 year anniversary as an Open and Affirming Congregation with a display of rainbows! We heard from our former pastors Rev. Fred and Rev. Paul, and received congratulations from The Coalition, our UCC national office. We heard testimonies from our own members about why it is so important that we not only proclaim ourselves as Open and Affirming, but live out this intentional welcome. Then after the service our Mayor Farrah Khan and Radiant Health Care’s Executive Director, Phil Yaeger, joined us with words from Dannie Cesena who sits on the Advisory Board for the Office of Health Equity at the CA Department of Public Health. We toasted ourselves in celebration and challenge to continue to expand our welcome and fight for equality.

Mid month, the clergy of IUCC came together and shared their love of our church, inspiring all of us as they explained why they chose to make our church their faith home. October ended with a lot of joy and spooky silliness as we faced our fears and found our God (and candy!). And perhaps most exciting of all: coffee hour returned! We packed a lot into one month! What a celebration of community!

And now we find ourselves in the month of gratitude. While we’re still feeling the repercussions of the pandemic, I remain so grateful for our congregation. We’ve been evolving how we do and be church together and while it’s honest to admit it’s been challenging, we continue to find inspiration and celebration as the Spirit works among us.

I’m so grateful to all of you who have watched our services online, who’ve returned, who’ve sung with masks on and held the spirit instead of your neighbor’s hands. So many of you even came to church when there was no cookie or coffee as incentives to get up! Others of you are happily sipping your cup of joe at home while tuning in. It has been weird, and even though we’re becoming accustomed to our new normal, we have to admit we carry some anxiety about the future.

It’s easy to feel grateful in the good times, but we people of faith are called to live lives full of gratitude, even, or perhaps, especially, when it’s challenging. So I am so grateful to you all. We have been gifted a spirit of celebration! We have been challenged to work for justice. We have been given an opportunity to serve. We have been blessed with a community of support. There are so many reasons to give thanks. So let me begin this month with these simple two words: “Thank you.”

I look forward to sharing my gratitude with you and for you as we embrace this month’s worship opportunities, especially our beloved tradition of a joint Thanksgiving celebration with University Synagogue on November 19th. We’ll begin the month remembering the Saints and we’ll end it beginning Advent!

I hope you’ll take the opportunity to fully appreciate your IUCC family and the many blessings each of us have to be in this faith community! Don’t forget to turn in your 2022 Pledges so we can celebrate together on November 14th!

In gratitude,
Pastor Sarah
We continue to make adjustments that bring us closer to the church life we’re familiar with. Coffee Hour and hymnals have returned to our Sunday mornings. And this month, work will finally begin on a new patio cover, replacing the old pergola!

We’ve worked hard to keep our facilities in good shape, but as they continue to age, they continue to need maintenance – preventive and problem-focused. Even our new addition required some work this summer; as a builder once told my father, maintenance starts the day you get the keys.

Your pledges and financial support are vital in keeping this a place to work for justice in an atmosphere of peace and love. Your commitments in time and talent are important, too, especially as we find it necessary to do things in new ways. I’d love to show a few people how easy it is to operate worship technology on Sunday mornings! (hint, hint…)

More groups are meeting on site, some in “hybrid” format with a Zoom option – book groups, Comma Groups, choir rehearsals, Scouts. And it’s exciting to hear about plans for a Holiday Concert by the Chancel Choir – in our sanctuary on Dec. 5!

Adult Sunday school returned in October, with a series on three Gnostic Gospels. The four weeks of Advent, beginning Nov. 28, will offer a video series on the Christmas stories from Amy-Jill Levine, “Light of the World.” Thanks to Eduardo Arismendi-Pardi and Craig Repp!

Our Comma Groups are reading from current blogs this year, engaging with contemporary thinkers on the latest topics in faith and social justice. There are still a few spaces available, so contact me in the church office soon! Thanks to leaders Eduardo Arismendi-Pardi, Bil Aulenbach, Tricia Aynes, Terry LePage, and Kathi Smith!

Ken Wyant continues to “pack them in” – on site and by Zoom – with Bible Study on Tuesday afternoons. His perspectives on the characters and events in the book of Genesis are always enlightening, and often levied with humor!

And thanks to both Diversity & Inclusion and Green Faith for providing thought-provoking speakers in recent weeks. The leaders of Diversity & Inclusion are working on a significant speaker-event for early February, so plan to stay in town and save a spot on your calendar!

First work on the new patio cover begins!
My favorite time of the year is upon us! The air is crisp and cool, and the holidays are approaching fast. I hope you’ve had a chance to enjoy all the fun and exciting things happening here at church.

On October 17, we had a joyful celebration of our 30th anniversary of being Open and Affirming with a balloon arch, guest speakers, and toasts all around. Then on October 24, we heard from our exceptional clergy about how much IUCC has meant to them. We are so blessed to have these dedicated, knowledgeable scholars among us! That same afternoon, we had the opportunity to hear from Dr. Alabi, a professor at Orange Coast College, about the importance of ethnic studies and critical race theory (see synopsis of her Zoom presentation on page 9).

Spooky Sunday on October 31 was a hoot! It was such fun to see everyone dressed up in their Halloween costumes! Trunk or Treat was a joy as always, with lots of car trunks decorated for Halloween. I love to see all your creative and imaginative ideas! Thanks to everyone who decorated their trunks and provided candy for this very special event.

Our Ministry With Young People and our Mission & Service Ministry are putting together a service event to help our unhoused neighbors. The event will be in person on Saturday, November 6, from 10 a.m. to 12 noon. It is open to all, but especially designed to younger folks and their families. There’s a service component (assembling hygiene/first aid-kits and writing cards and notes of support) and an awareness component too. Contact Lauren if you’d like to participate.

I’m looking forward to our joint Thanksgiving service with IUCC and University Synagogue on Friday, November 19, at 7 p.m. followed by a reception. If you haven’t attended one of these before, please plan to come to this one. It is one of the most inspiring, heartwarming services we have all year. The two congregations alternate hosting duties each year for an evening of warm fellowship and thanksgiving to celebrate our incredible 30+ years of friendship. This year, University Synagogue will be our host. As always, this special service will feature the combined choirs of each congregation, and the result is pretty impressive. All are welcome to attend.

Coffee Hour is back! We owe a lot of thanks to Hospitality Chair Alex Ingal for researching the matter and persuading both boards to resume this much-anticipated and beloved tradition of our church. I’m hoping that bringing back Coffee Hour will bring all of you back in person as well – we miss you, and we can’t wait to see you again. Please come back as soon as you’re comfortable so we can join in fellowship!

It’s been such a pleasure to hear our chancel choir again, and we are in for a special treat on December 5 when they produce “Home for the Holidays,” a compilation of familiar songs and carols interspersed with short readings about how much fun it is to be together again at Christmas. You won’t want to miss this event!

We’re nearing the end of the 2022 stewardship campaign, but there’s still time to make your pledge if you haven’t done so already. Please prayerfully consider what you can give to support your church and the many services it provides. Pledges are merely an estimate of what you think you will be able to give, and you can always amend them. Your estimate helps us determine what we can and cannot do in the year ahead. Thank you!

In hope and optimism,

Tricia
The stewardship theme for 2022 is **REFRESH>REBOOT>RENEW!**

Strategic Planning Task Force members
(L to R): Kelly Garrity; Rev. Steve Swope (Facilitator); Cheryl Arismendi; Jon Ingal; Alex Ingal; Tricia Aynes (serving ex-officio); Bil Aulenbach; Sarah Wall; Cesar Sangalang (Chair); and Linda Heath. Not pictured (because she took the photo!) is Pastor Sarah Halverson-Cano (serving ex-officio).

I am honored to have been chosen to chair our Strategic Planning Task Force. Being a member of IUCC for the past 5 years, singing with our Chancel Choir, serving on the Fund Development Committee, and my non-profit work in Orange County, have prepared me for this responsibility, and I look forward to serving our congregation through this work.

Thank you again to all who expressed interest in joining the task force. We went in with the intention of assembling a group of members not just to represent the diversity in our congregation including age, background, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, and ministry activity, but also to represent demographics in our community that we see our congregation welcoming into our church family. I would like to introduce the members of our Strategic Planning Task Force: Alex Ingal, Bil Aulenbach, Cheryl Arismendi, Jon Ingal, Kelly Garrity, Linda Heath, Sarah Wall, and Cesar Sangalang. Pastor Steve has been facilitating our conversations and connecting our work with the mission and values of IUCC. Pastor Sarah and Tricia Aynes have also been in attendance, providing insight and organizational knowledge that add value to our meetings.

The task force started meeting in early October, with our work carrying us into the holiday season. I thank the congregation for entrusting the task force with this important work as we strategize around the challenges that our church currently faces and identify the opportunities that will keep IUCC strong and help it to continue to flourish in the future.

- Cesar F. Sangalang, Jr., Chair, Strategic Planning Task Force

Please make your 2022 pledge!

Your pledge to IUCC helps our leaders plan for the coming year, knowing “about how much” funding to expect. If you haven’t done so already, log on to our website and make your pledge for 2022. Go to [iucc.org/giving/pledge](http://iucc.org/giving/pledge) and help IUCC Refresh > Reboot > Renew!

New Members joined October 17, 2021:
(L to R): Pastor Sarah with Keller Horton, Debra Koppel, Olivia Sirchio, Melissa & Chris Walsh. Welcome!!

Employees celebrating birthdays in November:

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New Members
IUCC Child Care Committee members Linda Heath, Cheryl Arismendi, Pastor Sarah, and Tricia Aynes joined ECC Director Irma Rosales and our preschool teachers for a fun Trunk or Treat event on October 29.
The Importance of Ethnic Studies and Critical Race Theory

A synopsis of a talk given by Dr. Jessica Ayo Alabi to D & I Ministry on October 24 via Zoom

Dr. Alabi is Professor and Chair of the Sociology, Ethnic Studies, Gender Studies, and Social Justice Studies Department at Orange Coast College
by Tricia Aynes

“This is an invitation to participants for ideological struggle to choose between being complicit and moving towards justice.” – Dr. Alabi

Ethnic Studies
Dr. Alabi began by explaining that the discipline of Ethnic Studies came from a movement started by minority students who began fighting for it in the 1960s. It is NOT multicultural or diversity or global studies. It focuses on the four groups who have been excluded yet are foundational to US history: Native Americans; African Americans; Asian Americans; and LatinX Americans.

Ethnic Studies looks at these groups through an interdisciplinary lens. The goal is to correct and reinstate these groups who were not included as they should have been. The US has a long history of people who became part of the country, some of whom happily assimilated, while others had a very different social condition. All four of these particular groups navigated their experience differently and have a unique history. The culture they created, their politics of resistance, and what they’ve endured are all things that Ethnic Studies explores.

A common criticism of US history is that it features white history, but doesn’t address the contributions of other groups. “The discipline takes on a comprehensive and dynamic inquiry of the experiences of the racial and ethnic minorities as they have lived, survived, resisted, and thrived under inhumane conditions yet often created something unique,” says Dr. Alabi.

She explains that in 2020, California Assembly Bill 1460 created an Ethnic Studies requirement to graduate from a state university. It took effect in Fall 2021. Students must take at least one lower division, 3 unit class in Ethnic Studies. Much of this has been done at a community college level, but it affects four year universities as well. There are five competencies, and all classes must have at least three of the five. Each competency has a social justice focus central to the Ethnic Studies emphasis. In their haste to comply with the new law, some colleges tried to throw together classes that weren’t true Ethnic Studies courses. They didn’t want to do the transformative work, and they didn’t want to devote funding to hire full-time faculty. It has created a lot of anger and division.

Dr. Alabi hears the following arguments against Ethnic Studies all the time: Why do we need it – aren’t all these groups covered in US history or American Government courses? Why are they forcing us to take it? It’s a white guilt course – what about White Studies?

She responds, “The focus of the course being about a group isn’t just for that group alone. It’s about providing a cultural breadth and depth so we can make sure students have a good liberal arts education. Ethnic Studies focuses on the experiences, narratives, and lives of racial and ethnic minorities. It’s about helping students realize their own privilege. Hearing about the inhumane behaviors of our ancestors shows that people can do bad things. Understanding history helps us deconstruct these processes so these things do not repeat themselves. The classes are designed to educate students and empower them to change.”

She goes on to explain that while there’s an emotional response to inhumane actions, it’s not just white people who feel it. “Whites were victims of it too,” she says. “But whiteness was a tool of oppression by wealthy landowners. My students learn that whiteness was created for a purpose. We have nuanced conversations about complex topics. They leave empowered with knowledge.”

Critical Race Theory
“Critical Race Theory is not a noun, it’s a verb,” she emphasizes. “That’s what is most important to know about CRT. CRT is a practice used to interrogate our society through a lens of race. It looks at the role of race and racism in our society and critiques the social construction of race. It’s a theory used to understand what’s going on in our society, not a set of facts per se. If you don’t want
to accept it, you don’t have to. CRT is just a lens through which we can explain what’s going on in society.”

“It critiques how the social construction of race and institutionalized racism perpetuates a racial caste system that relegates people of color to the bottom tiers,” she continues. “Some people believe our law is neutral. But the law isn’t neutral. Racism is still institutionalized. We don’t yet have a system that deconstructs it. Racism is the legacy of colonialism and slavery.” She showed the following slide to explain more fully:

**CRT Applied**
- Race is a social reconstruction and is socially significant.
- Racism is normal and embedded within systems and institutions, replicating social inequality.
- Racism is codified in structures and woven into public policies and laws, which reproduce systemic racism.
- Rejects claims of a pure meritocracy or colorblindness policies.
- Affirms and validates the experiences, narratives, and methodologies of marginalized people of color.
- The “Jefferson” version.

She explains the last point by saying, “Knowledge comes from academic journals published in a racist society. Those versions of knowledge are still validated. There were large groups of people who tried to invalidate them, but because they were not in positions of power, their positions were not validated and included. What if we heard about American history from a slave on Jefferson’s plantation? Our society has trained us to invalidate these other voices.”

The misinformation about CRT is pervasive in our society. Dr. Alabi wants us to know that the central tenet of CRT is the importance of looking at other versions of history – other voices - and thinking critically about what it would mean to validate these other versions equally. CRT is about recognizing that racism is embedded in our society and encouraging us to widen our vision to consider the bigger picture.

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**Mission & Service Ministry**

**Families Forward Angel Tree Project**

For the past several years, Mission and Service Ministry has supported the efforts of Families Forward located in Irvine. Their mission, with our help, is to keep families who are experiencing financial stress and homelessness together and ultimately to find economic stability.

It is particularly hard during the holidays for such families, who don’t have the luxury of providing gifts for their children. So here is your chance to help children and their parents enjoy the holiday season by contributing to our Families Forward Angel Tree Project.

We will be adopting some families (possibly 4 or 5) with ages and genders of recipients and the gifts they would like to receive. There will be a small holiday tree in the narthex from which you can select an ornament representing the family whom you’re adopting and the gifts you are donating. That ornament identifying the family will stay with the gifts.

Our drive will continue through Sunday, December 5th.

Thank you from the Mission and Service Ministry.
Coffee Hour is BACK!

Did you hear? Coffee Hour is BACK!

If you have attended the most recent in-person services, you have probably noticed that Coffee Hour has returned. Isn’t that exciting? This also means IUCC needs you to return to volunteering until robots take over and do the work for us (not expected any time soon).

Coffee Hour is a wonderful service provided to you through both IUCC and donations of time and resources. Just think of the magic involved. You might find yourself snacking on my famous Pumpkin Chocolate Cookies that are endorsed by the mayor of Irvine, or you may just be sipping on a cup of fair-trade coffee. Whichever it is, you may notice someone doing the exact same thing right next to you. Because it is awkward to just stand around watching people, one of you decides to introduce yourself and a connection is made. These connections are what builds a community, and your community needs your help.

You can help produce the coffee hour magic by hosting, donating, or cleaning. If you host, you will get to see many smiling faces. Hosting is an AMAZING way to talk to many people in a short amount of time. If you are trying to promote an event, your ministry, or a comma group, there is no better way than hosting coffee hour. If hosting isn’t your thing or you don’t have time, no problem! You can still support coffee hour by donating consumables (snacks and beverages). If you are extra dedicated to giving back, why not consider helping with preparations or clean up?

There are many ways you can give back to fit your budget or schedule. So put down the pumpkin cookie…well actually take a second one, and then visit www.tinyurl.com/IUCCoffeeHour to see how YOU can give back. You can always contact me if you have questions, comments, or concerns (jalexingaliucc@gmail.com). Thank you!

J. Alex Ingal,
Hospitality Chair

Our D & I Cross-Cultural Dinners continue this month!

We’re staying right in the USA for our upcoming cross-cultural dinner! On November 13, we will enjoy the delicious soul food at Georgia’s in the Packing House in Anaheim. (https://www.georgias-restaurant.com/) The owner, Gretchen, will be joining us and sharing with us the story of the food and the culture behind it. She’s a delight to visit with, and you will be glad to get to know her. Each of our outings so far has been at least as enjoyable simply as an opportunity for fellowship. Come enjoy the fellowship and the food! As I’ve said before, our not-so-secret mission is to equip ourselves with better understanding of the diverse people in our community, making it possible for us to include and work alongside all of our neighbors to make a better world.

We’ll be eating outdoors on the patio or at tables in the adjacent Farmer’s Park. We’ll eat at 12:30 on Saturday, November 13. The Packing House is at 440 S. Anaheim Blvd. in the heart of Anaheim. There is free parking. [If any of the restaurant choices isn’t your choice of food, come along for the learning and fellowship and just enjoy a beverage.]

Please contact Craig Repp if you believe you will be able to join us. It will help us to know how many of the patio tables to reserve for the group. craigrepp@gmail.com or 949-463-0331.
SHARED SERVICE OF THANKSGIVING
FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 19, 7 P.M.

The joint Thanksgiving service with IUCC and University Synagogue is one of the most inspiring, heartwarming services we have all year. The two congregations alternate back and forth each year for an evening of warm fellowship and thanksgiving to celebrate our incredible 30+ years of friendship.

This year, University Synagogue is our host! All are welcome to attend the service on Friday, November 19, at 7 p.m. followed by a reception.

As always, the service will feature the combined choirs of IUCC and University Synagogue.

The Irvine United Congregational Church
Chancel Choir
presents
Home for the Holidays

A concert of seasonal and special music to warm your heart with the Spirit of Christmas.

Sunday, December 5, 2021
7:00 pm
Irvine United Congregational Church
4915 Alton Parkway, Irvine, CA 92604

A freewill offering will be taken to benefit the IUCC General Fund.
A little background: Choir members from IUCC, the Church of the Foothills, and Long Beach UCC will combine to travel to Hawaii in June. They will sing one Sunday service and two evening concerts, and will enjoy the Hawaii culture and breezes. Members of all congregations who want to go on a shadow trip can accompany us, cheer us on, and have fun with us in that beautiful place. While we do not need more people to go to make the trip happen, we would love to have more of the IUCC family along if they want to go. Space is limited, but there is some space left. Initial deposits are due November 5th, and are fully refundable until December 1st.
As we slowly come out of “pandemic living” and begin a return to familiar routines, we’ve been acknowledging differences in individual “resilience” in both dealing with, and recovering from, situations of crisis and trauma. I’ve been urging parents and others who are involved in the daily life of children and teens to pay close attention to signs and signals from individual young people indicating how well they are doing – or not doing. All studies on this subject reveal that individuals vary greatly on their ability to weather difficult events, and part of love is to pay attention to those we love to see them as they are, and to meet their needs as we discover them. We’ve looked at a variety of individual characteristics which contribute to resilience, and last month we began an approach to evaluating and helping based on Abraham Maslow’s concept of “Six Basic Needs.”

Last month we pondered the most basic need for all living creatures, and that is the need to survive. The past two years have been very unusual in confronting children and young people with sickness and death on a level not seen in many decades. You probably noticed how differently individual young people dealt with the daily “counts” of dead people, from callous indifference and denial to unwarranted anxiety and fear. The same is true for adults, of course.

The next basic need of the “hierarchy of basic needs” is the need for safety and security. When we are not worried about staying alive, we next worry about any events that threaten our well-being. At the beginning of life, babies are extremely limited in their ability to protect themselves and are almost entirely dependent on parents and caretakers to keep them safe. A baby’s primary contribution to their own care-taking is the ability to reach out for help by crying. Crying is the acknowledgment that – at least from the baby’s point of view - others are needed to show up and soothe fears and fix whatever is wrong. From the very beginning, we witness differences in levels of fear and anxiety as some babies are frequently calling for help while others lay quietly in their cribs waiting for someone to show up. The ability to “self sooth” is a contributor to resiliency, with some individuals able to quiet their own fears while others immediately reach out to others. Again, this is also true for adults (grown up babies). It is important that adults look for signals from children at any age that they need help calming themselves so that we can step in and prevent unnecessary anxiety.

An important component of feeling “safe and secure” is predictability. Rituals and routines are very important for establishing a sense of safety for children. (In my work with abused children, this was true for children of all ages who previously lived in families where they never knew what was going to happen. It was never a good idea to serve chicken on meatloaf night!) As all parents know, young children can read the same book every night before bed. Heaven help the parent who changes or leaves out part of the story! This is one reason children prefer video watching to book reading. Videos never change! You probably read/heard a lot during our time of social isolation how adults began to establish routines for themselves, and if possible with others around them. Pizza from the same pizza place, on the same night each week. Familiar breakfast cereal. Adults even carried on about not being able to get their “regular coffee” from their “regular coffee place” as places closed. Routines are soothing for all of us. There is a great line in the movie “Cider House Rules” with Michael Caine about children in an orphanage. A new child asks one of the older kids: “Why does he say the same thing every single night when we go to bed?” The older child replies: “Because we like it!”

Now that school is no longer like school used to be, you may notice that some children are having trouble with the changes. Others are complaining that social activities have been cancelled or are inconsistent with the way things used to be. The more changes your children are experiencing in their lives away from home, the more important it will be to build in soothing, familiar, comfortable routines at home that children/teens can count on. Taco Tuesday is one such “ritual” that restaurants have figured out. Put your own predictable rhythms in place. It will be good for the whole family.

Finally, keep stressing with your loved young ones that all of the inconveniences – mask wearing, for example – are because nothing is more important to us than the safety of the children we love. Make it a loving, soothing, statement – not a harsh command. Tuck them in. Hug them when they come home. Give them a night light if they need one. Play a favorite song for them before bed. They might want the same one every night. How many of you listen to the same songs over and over? Ahhh yes, how soothing.
The caregiver led me to a back bedroom. There, sitting in bed was the elderly woman I came to visit. I worked for a church as their director of outreach and one of my responsibilities was to visit members who were confined to their homes due to age or illness. We referred to them as shut-ins. I often felt a bit apprehensive, not knowing how I would be received. I was young and found it difficult at times to talk with the elderly. We were from different worlds, but I did learn to ask questions to draw them out.

This time I was well received. Agnes sat in bed surrounded by puffy pillows of all shapes and sizes. With a welcoming smile, she beckoned me to approach her and pointed to a bedside chair. I sat down next to her large ornate bed with its curlicue headboard and glanced around the room: flowered wallpaper, heavily draped windows, a dark dresser with a large mirror, and doilies on each furniture surface.

“What brings you here?” Agnes asked, after I introduced myself and the caregiver left to give us privacy. I noticed a gray braid wound on the top of her head and her painted fingernails peeking out from the sleeves of her lacey bed-jacket. Though bedridden, she was pleasant and perfectly capable of conversation.

“I’m here for a visit to see how you’re doing and to learn if the church can be of help to you.”

Agnes smiled, tilted her head and looked at me over her eyeglasses, and said, “That’s nice. I appreciate it. It’s wonderful that you work for our church. From what I can tell, they are fortunate to have you.” Her voice was gravely yet strong. “What did you say your name is?”

I repeated it. Agnes’s eyes brightened and she said, “I have a friend with that last name. I’ve known her for years. I wonder if you know her. Her first name is Gladys. She had eight children, five boys and three girls.”

“Gladys?” I couldn’t believe it. “Gladys is my mother-in-law. What a coincidence.” I was pleased with this connection, as it could help me establish some rapport with Agnes. “Since you’ve known Gladys for years, what was she like in her younger years?” I inquired.

“Oh, we were the best of friends,” she said with a smile that revealed her pleasure in remembering her friend. “She was so much fun; we laughed a lot. We talked about our children and our husbands. Sometimes we shared our problems.” Agnes paused and lost in her memories, stared straight ahead. Finally, with a frown, she said, “I wonder what happened with that one son of hers. He got mixed up with a divorcee.” Her disdain showed in her pinched face. “Can you imagine - a divorcee - and he was going to be a pastor. What was he thinking? A woman like that could ruin him. Poor Gladys was so upset.” Agnes shook her head and made a tsk, tsk sound. “I wonder what happened to him. Do you know?”

My breath went shallow as my chest tightened and I said, “Yes. I do know. He married the woman.”

“What? That’s terrible. Poor Gladys. When he got mixed up with that woman, I figured Gladys would put an end to that.”

I gulped and tried to look at her with kind eyes. “Agnes, I am that woman.”

Her head snapped towards me. Her thin lips became a tight line, and her eyes widened as though I’d cursed in her face. She said, “You? You’re that woman?”

“Yes, we married. My husband became a pastor; he works for the church headquarters.” Hoping to brighten our conversation, I smiled and added, “We have three lovely children.”

Agnes went into her own head and was no longer communicative. I asked if I or the church could be of help to her in any way. When she shook her head, I asked if I might pray with her. She glared at me but finally nodded. Following a brief prayer, I concluded with the benediction, “May God bless you and keep you. May God’s face shine on you and give you peace.”

Agnes stared straight ahead. I touched her hand and thanked her for the opportunity to visit, then left. My inquiries for future visits were left unanswered.
What does it mean to be “blessed” from a progressive Christian perspective? I believe the meaning of being blessed is about being thankful for our ability to practice the teachings of the historical Jesus in all our affairs. The practice of LOVE, that is, Agape (ἀγάπη) is at the heart of what it means to be blessed. However, the meaning of being blessed is sometimes associated with the Theology of Prosperity.

In my interactions with conservative Christians, I often hear expressions of gratitude, yet I am not always sure what being blessed means to them. A gratitude list is a good practice to be reminded of the good things we have and how we can use our blessing to bless others. Thanksgiving allows us to examine how we can serve others in need. In these interactions I hear exclamations and references, in one form or another, of I am so blessed.

I have been thinking about how I can deconstruct the meaning behind the word blessed or the words I am so blessed. In my experience with conservative fundamentalists, these words are linked to a capitalist conservative Jesus whose persona has been redefined and appropriated by conservative capitalist fundamentalists.

The words I am so blessed have been codified with a Jesus who is a proponent of small government, free market capitalism, and xenophobic nationalism. These words are much more about the health-and-wealth (Benny Hinn and Joel Osteen) philosophy of fundamental Christians than about being blessed to have the opportunity to challenge political ideologies antithetical to the teachings of the historical Jesus.

The current political ethos in which we live equates poverty to laziness. The words I am so blessed are an expression of the Theology of Prosperity. Proponents of this theology postulate that faith and hard work leads to achieving health, wealth, and victory. The Theology of Prosperity fails to take into account dramatic economic and racial inequalities that have plagued American society. Terms like “blessed”—and also “thoughts and prayers”—are dog whistles for conservative political paradigms that place great faith in the positive and self regulating character of free markets.

I sincerely hope that when you hear the words I am so blessed that you consider asking the ones from whom you hear this, “What do you mean by being blessed?” I would predict that you will, as I did, learn that being blessed to many fundamentalist/literalist Christians is about taking scriptures out of context to justify hate and exclusion while promoting oppression and marginalization by appealing to scriptures that lack historical or literary basis. What does it mean to you to be blessed? Only you can answer this question.
Glenna Matthews, Woman Warrior
by The Reverend Doctor Jerry von Talge
Member, Diversity & Inclusion Ministry and Member, Advocates for Peace & Justice Ministry

From the book Cassandra Speaks, When Women Are the Storytellers, The Human Story Changes, by Elizabeth Lesser:

“In the Greek myth, Cassandra was given the gift of seeing into the future by the god Apollo, in an attempt to woo her. When he tried to seduce her, she refused. Enraged, Apollo put a curse on her - she would continue to see into the future but no one would believe her predictions. After no one believed her predictions of several tragic events, she went mad and was ultimately raped by a Greek warrior.

As the professor spun me the tale of Cassandra, I began to feel less and less as if she was speaking about characters from a Greek myth, and more and more as if she was speaking about women in general, in ancient times and our times. Finally, she said, “Listen here, young lady. Women have been ignored, ridiculed, punished, even killed for their opinions forever. But without the balancing power of her voice—the female voice—things in this world end in disaster. Cassandra’s tale is your tale. It is all of our tales. We must speak, and we must be taken seriously. We must change the way the story ends.”

I am reminded of the story of The Little Engine That Could. Glenna’s life can be characterized as a little girl who loved books and decided in high school to become a woman intellectual. This little girl grew up to be that woman intellectual and also a professor, author, pioneer in woman’s history, and a champion for women’s rights. In reference to Elizabeth Lesser’s book, Cassandra Speaks, Glenna changed the way Cassandra’s story ends. When Glenna spoke, people listened - in various U.S. cities and several beyond the borders of this country.

Glenna is a woman warrior. With a backbone of steel, a fierce determination, and raw courage, she refused to be stopped on her journey to reach her goals. She has battled persistent and ugly gender discrimination to achieve a gratifying measure of academic and personal accomplishment. Whether it be visiting a farm labor camp with her father as a child (the beginning of her social consciousness), teaching at Stanford, UC Berkeley, UCLA and UCI as a visiting associate professor, being a Fulbright scholar, teaching abroad, teaching American History to students at Moscow University, curating exhibits, publishing six books, being sent by our State Department to lecture in 12 cities in 4 countries in 14 days, being toasted at a luncheon in her honor in Copenhagen, or as a pioneer in women’s studies, Glenna has done it all.

A childhood That Gave Glenna What She Needed – A Strong Ego

As an only child, adults doted on Glenna. She gained the ego strength necessary to fight the many battles against some of the most virulent forms of gender discrimination and cruelty. Her father, a newsletter and newspaper editor, had contacts with people in the literary world. She got her love of books from her parents. Her father’s cousin published a book, raising her consciousness to the possibilities of writing. She and her parents read books out loud. She has lived a life of reading voraciously. She states, “Books have been my friends throughout my whole life.” She reports that she has thousands of books in her home.

The downside of Glenna’s pampered childhood was that she began to feel smothered and that her life was not her own. She needed to get away. She finished high school at age sixteen and married at age eighteen. A teenage mother, she followed her then-husband as the U S Air Force moved him to different locations. Because of all the moves, it took her 14 years to get her Bachelor’s Degree.

Fighting the Battles of Gender Discrimination and Personal Attacks As A Woman

In 1969, Glenna applied to the graduate program in history at Stanford University and was rejected despite having good, if unconventional, credentials. She went to see the professor with whom she had applied to study. He said to her, “Oh, you’re the Air Force wife,” and was dismissive of her ambition to study history. She was furious, but excited to apply to Stanford again, to study in the infant field of U.S. women’s history. She talked to Carl Degler, a pioneer

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in woman’s studies (there were no women in the field). He made no promises, but she was ultimately accepted as a graduate student. She dedicated one of her books to him, American Woman’s History: A Student Companion, published by Oxford University Press, in 2000.

For six years (1978-1984), Glenna taught at Oklahoma State University, which was a woman professor’s worst nightmare. Symptomatic of this toxic environment was one situation where she was with a group of male faculty members who were discussing the registration for their softball team, which would cost $100. Glenna was asked if she would take care of the registration. After she declined, saying that she was not going to pay the $100, one of the male faculty members said, “Glenna, you make that much in a night,” implying that she was a prostitute. Another man said, “Oh no, Glenna’s worth more than $100.” A sign saying “A whore” was put on her faculty door. It took a lot to withstand the withering attacks because she was a woman.

Because of relentless sexual harassment, she never knew when a conversation would turn ugly with personal attacks. She finally had enough and mustered up her courage to move back to California, seeking new teaching opportunities. The risk paid off. She had positions as associate visiting professor at UC Berkeley, Stanford, Davis, and ultimately, UCLA and UCI.

Discussion on Cassandra Speaks
Glenna likens Hillary Clinton to Cassandra, explaining that Hillary tried to warn us about Trump, using the term “basket of deplorables.” She relates that Hillary was vilified by some and that she received “terrible treatment” from mainstream media.

Her view an, as an historian, on the future of the feminist movement
Glenna says that things have changed dramatically for women since her childhood, “but we still have a long way to go.” She elaborates, saying that in her childhood, women were limited to the “pink ghetto” in their choice of professions, with such roles as nurses, librarians, and schoolteachers. They were not school principals professors or business leaders, like we have today. Further, we’ve had five women on the Supreme Court, a woman Speaker of the House, and a woman vice president. She states, “This is almost beyond my imagination.”

Summing Up

Glenna believes that her greatest accomplishment is raising her children, whom she is very proud of. She says, “My children are Karen, age 64, who’s a reporter for the Associated Press in New York, and David, age 61, who recently retired from the Santa Clara Valley Water District and who now volunteers at local animal shelters. I call them my greatest accomplishment because they are such loving parents to Margaret (Karen) who’s 23, and Monica, 30, and Justin, 21, as well as being good citizens.”

She states that her tombstone would say “Passionate for social justice.” Glenna’s story is one of hope and encouragement for each of us to push past the barriers that we encounter. Her story gives us courage to face and overcome adversity. She has shown the heights of what a woman can accomplish in a White male world. The civil rights freedom song, from an old Black spiritual, “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around,” introduced by the Reverend Ralph Abernathy in 1962, pretty much sums up Glenna’s life. Girls and women of all ages, you too have the power within to change the way Cassandra’s story ends in your life. Glenna’s advice to girls and women: “Be true to your best self.” Let Glenna’s life be your inspiration.